



American Black Duck Facts



American Black Duck

Identification

Male and female black ducks are similar to female mallards in appearance, but black ducks are darker overall, and have a dark tail. The male has a greenish-yellow bill, and the female's bill is dark olive. In flight, they have a purple wing-patch on the upper-wing with no white edges. Their silvery-white under-wing linings contrast sharply with these ducks' dark bodies.



Hen Mallard Duck

Life History

American black ducks breed in a variety of wetland habitats, from salt marshes to beaver ponds, river islands, and boreal bogs. They winter in salt water along the coasts, but also in a variety of freshwater areas inland, like Cayuga Lake.

Black ducks are dabbling ducks, tipping their bodies—head down, tail up—into shallow water to feed. They eat seeds, roots, stems, grain, aquatic plants and insects, crustaceans, mollusks, and some small fish.

Black duck nests are built on dirt mounds, hidden by vegetation, made of grass and weed stems, and lined with down. After incubation of the eggs, the male black duck does not participate in nesting.

Female black ducks lay about 9 eggs, with a range of 7 to 12, and incubates them for 26 to 29 days. Nestlings leave the nest within hours of hatching and remain with their mother until they can fly, at about 60 days.



Black Duck X Mallard Hybrid



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Migration and Wintering

Black ducks are most common in the Atlantic and Mississippi flyways, with more numbers along the Atlantic coast. They are most abundant on coastal wetlands. High concentrations of black ducks are found wintering between Long Island and North Carolina. Larger lakes large river valleys also accommodate black ducks in winter.

Population

Black duck populations have continuously declined since the 1950s. Reasons for the decline are unclear, but recent studies suggest that the expansion of mallard populations into black duck breeding habitats have resulted in hybridization and competition between these similar species. Other threats to populations include loss of habitat from human activities and disturbances. American black ducks are also very susceptible to lead poisoning when they eat spent lead shot while foraging in wetlands.

Interesting Facts

- The American Black duck is not black, but only appears so at a distance.
- Black ducks return to the same marshes each fall, and may starve rather than migrate farther south if those marshes are frozen!
- As soon as their down feathers dry, newly hatched ducklings are able to leave the nest and follow their mother to rearing areas with plenty of food and cover.
- The oldest American black duck on record was 26 years, 5 months old.
- Fossils of American black ducks, at least 11,000 years old, have been unearthed in Florida and Georgia.

